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AUTHOR Hoffman, Curt; Mischel, Walter
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ABSTRACT

The effects of observational purpose are thought to impact on such diverse processes as categorization, behavior perception, trait ascription, and memory. The role of observational purpose in the categorization of behavior was explored to determine whether differences between trait and goal concepts affect certain information-processing objectives. Episodes describing a college student's behavior were constructed with goal- and trait-based organizations. Subjects (N=30) sorted episodes into five categories and labelled each category according to one of five purposes: recall, empathy, personality impression, prediction of future behavior, or no purpose. Subjects categorizing episodes for recall or empathy organized episodes in terms of the character's goals. Subjects whose purpose was to form a personality impression or to predict future behavior organized episodes in terms of the character's traits. Results suggest that the purpose for which the observer expects to use behavioral information may influence how that information is encoded. Episodes categorized by the recall, personality impression, and no-purpose groups were presented to different subjects (N=36) who read the precategorized episodes and completed a free recall test. Results demonstrated that categorization produced by recall subjects facilitated the ability of new subjects to recall the episodes, relative to categorizations produced by personality impression and no-purpose subjects. (Author/NRB)

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Curt Hoffman and Walter Mischel

Stanford University

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Objectives and Strategies in the Layperson's Categorization of Behavior

Curt Hoffman and Walter Mischel

Stanford University

How do observers' information-processing objectives influence the features of behavior to which they attend and the manner in which they organize and use this information? It seems intuitively plausible that behavior observed, for example, with an eye toward memorizing an exact sequence of actions would be processed quite differently than that same behavior viewed for the purpose of forming a personality impression. Recently, a few psychologists have begun to explore these questions and have demonstrated the effects of "observational purpose" on such diverse processes as categorization (Jeffery & Mischel, 1979), behavior perception (Cohen & Ebbesen, 1979), trait ascription (Cohen & Ebbesen, 1979; Higgins, 1980), and memory (Cohen & Ebbesen, 1979; Hamilton, Katz, & Leirer, 1980; Jeffery & Mischel, 1979). We conducted a series of studies investigating (a) the role of observational purpose in the tendency to employ goal categories or trait categories in the organization of information about a person's behavior, and (b) the effects of goal-based versus trait-based organization of the information on subjects' ability to recall it. This paper briefly reviews some highlights of two of these studies.

Our interest in goal concepts as possible organizing themes in person cognition grew out of the conviction that people do not categorize social behavior exclusively, or even predominantly, in terms of personality traits. It is our impression that observers often encode a target's behaviors in terms of the target's plans or intentions, or put differently, in terms of goals which the behaviors appear to serve. The distinction between trait and goal concepts requires some elaboration. The two are similar in that both involve the inference

of a disposition on the part of the target; in this they contrast with concepts based on features of the environment. In the case of traits, however, one infers a disposition to behave in a particular style or manner (e.g., honestly) or to engage in a certain class of conceptually similar actions (e.g., displays of friendliness), whereas with goals one infers a disposition to act toward a specific end (e.g., winning the boss's approval). In the present context, the important question is whether there are general differences between trait and goal concepts which might cause them to be differentially suited (and perhaps, therefore, differentially used) for certain information-processing objectives. We offer the following tentative analysis in response to this question.

First of all, the vast majority of trait categories which a perceiver might need to use are already well established in (semantic) memory. They tend to have short, easily communicable names and are interconnected in a rich associative network. In addition, most traits contain an implicit evaluative component. Because of these qualities, and also because of their inherently nomothetic nature, which allows for easy comparisons among individuals, traits would appear to be ideally suited for the purpose of forming--and communicating--a general impression of what an individual "is like," that is, the individual's personality. This is hardly a novel idea, and much research attests to the central role of traits in the layperson's conception of personality. Furthermore, traits function as high-powered schemas having broad (and often far-flung) implications for the target's likely attributes, feelings, and behaviors in a wide variety of contexts (Cantor & Mischel, 1977, 1979). This feature of trait concepts enables them to serve as the "basis" for any number of judgments, decisions, and other speculative inferences which the observer might be called upon to make. Thus, for example, we might expect trait concepts to appear especially useful--from the point of view of the naive perceiver--as a basis for predicting the target's behavior in new or unfamiliar situations.

Whereas their excellent capacity for summarizing and generalizing diverse samples of behavior is the hallmark of trait categories, the sine qua non of goal categories, as we conceive them, is their ability to conjoin otherwise isolated actions into coherent, connected, rule-guided (and, in some cases, chronological) patterns. Because of this special integrative function of goal concepts, it may be that they serve as particularly good recall cues for their category members (the behaviors linked together by the common goal category). Research by Bower and his associates (Bower, 1976), for example, has shown that knowledge of the goals underlying characters' actions is a crucial determinant of subjects' ability to comprehend and recall stories. On the other hand, trait concepts possess certain features which would seem to make them less than ideal mnemonic devices. The mere fact that trait concepts are so well established in memory may render them less distinctive vis-à-vis particular category instances, and the same schematic quality which enables traits to serve the functions of generalization and inference is also likely to occasion intrusions and distortions in the recall of category exemplars (Cantor & Mischel, 1977, 1979). There is, then, some reason to expect that goal-based categories might be preferred over trait-based categories by observers whose purpose is to remember a target's behavior as accurately as possible.

Finally, it is interesting to speculate that goal-based categories may be preferentially employed in organizing instances of one's own behavior. Jones and Nisbett (1972) expressed a similar idea when they proposed that an actor conceives of his or her own personality as consisting of "values, goal priorities, and means of attaining goals" rather than as a "collection of response dispositions [traits]" (pp. 93-94). If this is the case, then we might also expect observers instructed to empathize with a target to employ goal-based categories in organizing information about the target's behaviors, since

there is evidence (Gould & Sigall, 1977; Regan & Totten, 1975) that empathy-oriented observers tend to process information like actors (in the sense that the same aspects of the available information are salient, resulting in similar "psychological perspectives"). Furthermore, empathy, like recall, might not be well served by the tendency to generalize from trait categories. Indeed, "empathy" may be conceptualized in terms of seeing what the other person is trying to do; "hostility," in contrast, may be viewed as stretching a phenomenon to fit a preconceived category (Kelly, 1955), as when a phenomenon is endowed with qualities of the category into which it has been placed.

To recapitulate, we have hypothesized that trait-based categories will be preferred by observers whose purpose is to form and communicate an impression of the target's personality or to make predictions of the target's behavior, whereas goal-based categories will be preferred by observers whose purpose is either to recall the target's behavior as accurately as possible or to empathize with the target.

Effects of Purpose on Categorization

To test the above hypotheses, we constructed a set of 25 episodes, each describing the behavior of a fictitious college student (Joan) in one specific situation. The episodes could be exhaustively and alternatively categorized on the basis of either (a) the various goals served by Joan's behaviors or (b) the various traits which she displays. There were five "built-in" goals (admission to medical school, weight loss, purchase of a sports car, independence from her boyfriend, and the poetry editorship of the school magazine) and five built-in traits (diligence, dishonesty, choosiness, generosity, and short-temperedness). Each of the 25 episodes exemplified one goal and one trait, and each goal and trait served as the organizing theme for a unique set of five episodes. Thus, the built-in goal- and trait-based organizations were alternative, mutually exclusive structures.

The subject's task was to sort the episodes into five categories (of unspecified size) and to assign each of these categories a label. The two dependent variables of greatest interest were (a) the objective correspondence of subjects' groupings to the built-in goal and trait catetories, expressed as a difference score ranging from -50 (perfect match with trait categories) through 0 (no match with either set of categories, or partial but equal match with both) to +50 (perfect match with goal categories), and (b) the content of the verbal labels assigned by subjects to their groupings, expressed as a difference in the proportions of labels referring to one of the built-in goals and to one of the built-in traits.[1] Subjects' purpose was manipulated by leading them to expect that they would have to perform another task (either recall, empathy, personality description, or prediction of future behavior) after they had sorted the episodes. In addition to these four groups, we included a "no-purpose" condition in which subjects merely categorized the episodes with no explicit instructional set. We were unable to make a confident guess concerning these subjects' preferred mode of categorization (goal-based or trait-based), although we were naturally interested to learn which, if either, organizational strategy would prevail in the absence of any particular information-processing objective. There were six subjects (three males and three females) per condition.

Group means on the category structure and category label variables are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. As can be seen, the results conformed very closely to our hypotheses. Recall and empathy subjects utilized more goal-based relative to trait-based structure in their sortings, and employed more goal relative to trait constructs as category labels, than did impression and prediction subjects (these contrasts were significant at the .05 level or better). Furthermore, t tests comparing each treatment mean with zero (the value indicating

Table 1

Relative Correspondence with Built-in Goal versus Trait Categories in Subjects' Organizations of the Episodes

Purpose				
Recall	Empathy	Impression	Prediction	None
+34.17	+37.17	-14.83	-15.83	+1.00

Note. Range of possible scores = -50 to +50. Positive scores reflect relatively greater correspondence with built-in goal categories, negative scores relatively greater correspondence with built-in trait categories.

Table 2

Relative Use of Goal versus Trait Constructs as Category Labels

Purpose				
Recall	Empathy	Impression	Prediction	None
+.60	+.80	-.47	-.68	-.02

Note. Range of possible scores = -1.00 to +1.00. Positive scores reflect relatively greater use of goal constructs, negative scores relatively greater use of trait constructs.

equal or indifferent use of built-in goal and trait information) were significant at the .05 level or better for all groups except the no-purpose condition. Interestingly, subjects in this group were equally divided with respect to preferred organizational strategy: exactly half categorized predominantly in terms of goals, and half in terms of traits. This would seem to indicate that there was nothing intrinsically preferable about either system of classification, so that in the absence of a clearly defined purpose, individual differences prevailed.

Effects of Categorization on Recall

The first experiment clearly showed that the purpose for which the observer expects to use behavioral information can greatly influence how that information is categorized (encoded) at input. An important question not addressed by this study, however, is whether the organizational strategies employed by our subjects for particular tasks (e.g., recall, empathy, etc.) facilitate the actual performance of those tasks. As a first pass at this question, we presented the episodes as categorized by three Experiment 1 groups (recall, impression, and no-purpose conditions) to new groups of subjects and later assessed their ability to recall them. Two new subjects were "yoked" to each subject in these three Experiment 1 conditions. There was no induction of purpose in this study and no mention of the purpose for which the original subjects had categorized the material; the subject's task was simply to read the precategorized episodes. Following this, we gave all subjects a surprise free recall test.

Each recalled episode was scored 0, 1, or 2 (interjudge reliability was .99). Mean total scores (maximum possible = 50) were 42.08 for the group yoked to the recall subjects, 32.71 for the group yoked to the impression subjects, and 34.29 for the group yoked to the no-purpose subjects. The overall effect of experimental

condition was significant at the .01 level, and individual comparisons indicated that the "recall" group's memory for the episodes was significantly better than that of either of the other two conditions ($p < .005$ in each case).

Summary and Conclusions

In sum, the first experiment demonstrated that categorizers' information-processing objectives influence the type of categories (goal- or trait-based) which they will form; the second experiment, in turn, showed how different modes of categorization may influence the eventual attainment of one of these objectives (recall). One of the clearest lessons of the present research is the readiness with which both trait and goal categories are utilized in the organization of information about behavior. The use of traits to conceptualize behavior has, in one guise or another, long been a favorite theme in research on person perception, but as the present studies have shown, an alternative and quite different mode of categorization not only can be readily and effortlessly adopted by the perceiver, but is actually preferred for certain purposes. It is hoped that the research reported here will help counterbalance the monolithic emphasis on trait concepts which has characterized the field or person perception, and that it will stimulate greater attention to alternative ways of comprehending social reality.

While we are inclined to regard the use of goal categories by recall and empathy subjects in Experiment 1 as highly appropriate for their purposes (especially in view of the results of the second experiment), the apparent faith in trait categories among impression and prediction subjects is more problematic. Although the impression group, in their preference for a trait-based approach to Joan's personality, are at least in good company (a similar approach has dominated academic psychology for most of the present century), it is by no means obvious--

and should not be assumed to have been obvious from our subjects' point of view--that traits represent the only or best descriptive language for this purpose. Indeed, many psychologists now believe that personality assessment would be better served by such idiographic concepts as personal constructs, expectancies, and goals (e.g., Mischel, 1973). Apparently, however, our impression-oriented subjects felt that a trait-based analysis of Joan's behavior would provide a more useful characterization of her than would one based on her personal ambitions and objectives. The prediction group's similar reliance on trait categories is somewhat more defensible under the circumstances, since our goal categories were probably of uncertain relevance to Joan's future behavior. It is also true, however, that traits have been shown to possess minimal predictive power, at best (Mischel, 1968). Perhaps the layperson is able to make better predictive use of trait categories than the professional psychologist has been able to; this is an interesting question which, to our knowledge, has not been investigated.

The question of how best to catalogue the variety of information-processing objectives characteristic of social life is an important one (cf. Cohen & Ebbesen, 1979, Wyer & Srull, 1980). It might be argued that there are virtually as many different observational goals as there are unique social situations. For example, reading a job application, watching a tragedian on stage, and meeting a friend for lunch might each activate a distinctive purpose (or set of purposes) which may or may not have much in common with those activated in other situations. It seems likely, however, that despite the undoubted diversity of interests and objectives which perceivers bring to social situations, this multiplicity of purpose can be parsimoniously taxonomized, and the corresponding processing strategies captured by means of a set of basic "rules." No special status, it should be noted, is claimed for the taxonomy adopted here. The number--and nature--

of observational goals necessary to describe the varieties of social information processing must await the cumulative results of much future investigation. This and other questions regarding the purposes for which people process behavioral data, the kinds of categories preferred for different observational goals, the rules governing their formation and use, and the effects of such categories on the cognitive activities for which they were created, will hopefully receive the increasing attention of theorist and researcher alike.

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Footnote

[1]We performed our major statistical analyses on <u>difference</u> scores because of the computational non-independence of the goal and trait scores themselves. Separate analyses would have been redundant.